

September 23, 1974

Dr. Martin M. Kaplan  
World Health Organization  
1211 Geneva 27 SWITZERLAND

Dear Martin,

I am pleased that you brought up the question of Berg's committee on DNA biohazards. To explain part of my position on this matter, it will save time if I just send you copies of some recent correspondence. I think there really is great danger the whole matter getting seriously out of hand and encumbering important research not only in molecular biology and in cancer biology but also in the study of pathogenic viruses generally. It would be very easy for a situation to develop where caution about public health hazards from accidental release of old or new agents greatly exceeded the losses from the discouragement of research in these areas. Most of the people that have been involved in these discussion to date have no experience and little concept of the practical problems of handling infectious agents. And some of the extrapolated predictions of hazard could be applied with equal logic to demanding a moratorium on, for example, research on rabies in tissue culture for fear that this might develop a mutant that might be transmitted more quickly and more readily than the street virus. Obviously this is not a matter about which WHO can keep its head in the sand in any respect. But rather than undertake independent and possibly confusing initiatives, I think it would be better if WHO took a direct part in the international symposium that I believe is being planned for February. This could be constructive in at least two ways: (1) perhaps by helping to provide or channel financial support for interested investigators from other parts of the world and perhaps representing a wider range of disease-microbiology interests to participate in the symposium, and (2) to represent WHO's own interests in providing a clear basis for the validation of research on infectious agents even keeping in mind the hypothetical possibilities of these becoming in turn sources of new difficulty.

The central propositions of concern that started this whole matter are reasonable enough but it is hard for me to communicate the madness that has then inflated the proceedings. Certainly too little has been said so far about the costs of sustaining even a moratorium much less a pervasive prohibition unless the restrictions are very carefully and very narrowly defined indeed.

So, I will wait until I have had a further reply from you before communicating with Paul. I did see him yesterday and he would want me to communicate the mishap that Nature had garbled the report of the committee

and that you should consult Science instead as the source of the accurate text.

If you know of WHO reports or other literature on standards for operation of practical as well as research laboratories in microbiology from the point of view of minimizing public hazards, I think this would be most useful to me and to others. One point I have not been able to get across to Dr. Berg is the extent to which every hospital laboratory is potentially a source of difficulties that equal or exceed those of the "new" fabrications that may result from splicing DNA. (What you may not know is that our own laboratory has also been working for the last several years along very similar lines but were "scooped" by Stan Cohen by his brilliant choice of his little plasmid as a vehicle for splicing.) You certainly should give equal weight to Dr. Cohen as to Dr. Berg in seeking advice for further policy formulation, particularly as Cohen is much more knowledgeable about medical as opposed to purely molecular biological consideration.

As to the planning meeting on the tropical diseases laboratory, I was in fact relieved to hear that the meeting had been postponed, for the time being, to mid-November, as it is now very much more likely that I will be able to participate. I am certainly eager to be able to contribute. I wonder if it would be too much to inquire whether a further postponement to approximately January 18-20 would be feasible or whether this is inconsistent with other timetable considerations. The reason is that I already have a commitment to be in Israel during the first 2 weeks of January, and I need hardly go further in expressing what a helpful convenience it would be to avoid an independent travel. In fact, considering that vantage point I would also be able to consider meeting at an African site if that alternative is appropriate.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr  
Enclosures